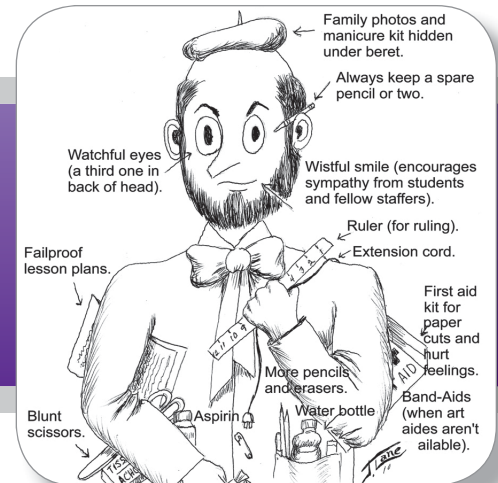


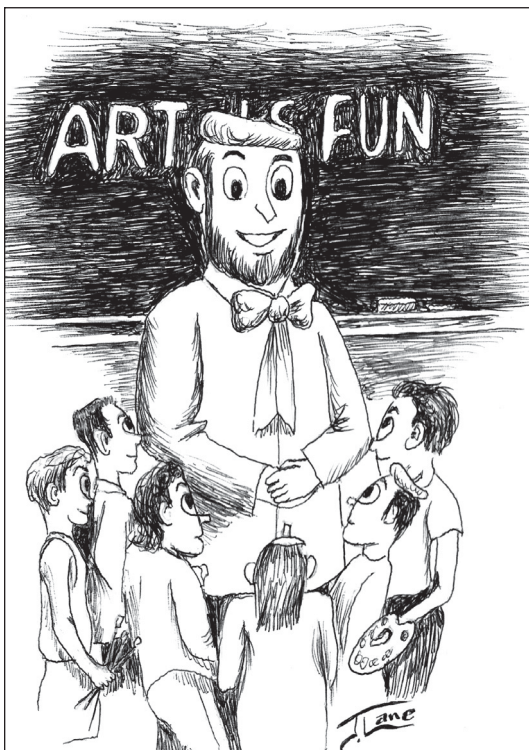
Valuable Insights into Teaching Art

Snippets of wisdom and helpful tips from a long-time, public school art instructor (teaching art really is more important than creating art)



This resource has five sections:

- Art Education
- Teaching Creativity
- Teaching Abstract Design
- Teaching with Crayons
- Teaching Tips



I flatter myself in thinking that, as a public school art instructor, I may have inspired an average of one student per year to become a professional artist. I taught for 26 years. That's 26 artists who may have been influenced by my efforts.

I'm not being too optimistic to say that by the time I die, I will have created something on the order of a thousand pieces of art. (I like round numbers.)

However, using that same, nice, round figure, during their careers, my protégés may create some 26,000 works of art. So far as I know, I have graduated four artists who have gone on to teach art.

Assuming they are as influential as I've been... well, you can do the math probably better than I. Yet, art teachers are often treated as excess baggage by the educational powers that be.

What follows is not original. I wish it were. I also wish I could remember where I picked it up, I'd love to give credit where it's due.

Despite those circumstances, I think it bears repeating:

Dear Editor:

I'm fed up with art teachers and their hefty salary schedules. What we need here is a little perspective.

Of course they've had to go to college and get degrees, some of them even master's degrees, but after all, to do what?

They try to teach kids useless stuff like drawing and painting, and about dead artists who never mattered much anyway.

If our kids need to learn such stuff, fine, but I see no reason to pay more than minimum wage for someone to teach my kid to play with clay and glue toothpicks together.

That's right; instead of paying outrageous taxes, I'd give them \$7.00 an hour (minimum wage rounded down somewhat).

Each parent should pay \$7.00 per hour. Now, how many children does an art teacher see a day, maybe 100 or so? Okay, times 100 children is... $\$7 \times 100 = \700 a day. Sounds high, but remember, teachers only work 180 days a year (I'm not about to pay them for vacations.)

Now, \$700 times 180 days a year is...\$126,000!

Huh? Wait a minute. Let's get a little perspective here. Minimum wage is too high. After all, what are they doing? Just baby-sitting, really.

I see no reason to pay minimum wages when my baby-sitter only gets \$4.00 an hour. And, she can draw better than that guy I saw... uhh, Picasoso, whatever his name is. That's more like it, I think.

Let's see, that's \$4 times 100 kids, that's \$400. Multiply that time 180 days and...hmm, \$72,000? (Maybe my calculator needs new batteries.)

GEEZZ! Wait a minute; let's get a little perspective here. Where the heck did that salary schedule go?

Art Education

Being an art educator, I've been asked at times about the state of art education in the United States.

First of all, given the fact that art is so subjective, there are virtually no standardized, nationwide tests by which to measure programs on a national, state, or even local level for comparison purposes. There is, however, one local indicator that might be helpful.

Generally speaking, the average participation in elective high school art programs hovers around 10 percent of the student body.



Anything over that generally indicates a superior art program. Anything much under that level may indicate curricular, instructional, financial, or administrative problems. Of course, if other elective programs in a school are exceptionally strong (band, drama, choral music, computers, etc.) then the art program may be perfectly fine, but merely suffer by comparison.

When a school district hires an art teacher, it is essentially buying a program; one that reflects the strengths and, unfortunately, the weaknesses of that individual instructor. At a high school level, since no one instructor is going to be equally strong in all areas, any single-teacher art department is bound to be a little uneven in its offerings.

Ideally, a school should be large enough to afford at least a two-person high school art teaching staff, with one instructor strong in two-dimensional areas and the second in three-dimensional/craft media. This usually allows for a well-rounded course of study. Of course, teacher longevity and experience counts for much in an art program.

While older teachers have a gradually widening generation gap to deal with, they also will have developed very broad technical skills, plus the teaching instincts to anticipate student behavior. Generally speaking, I think most elementary art programs are reasonably good because often they are taught by both a relatively young, entry-level specialist teacher augmented by an experienced classroom teacher.

College programs around the country are also quite good, because the competition for these teaching jobs and the paying students to fill their classes is intense. The financial success of the school is predicated on a good reputation and good programs.

If there is a weakness nationally, it is probably at the junior high (or middle school) and high school levels (grades 7-12).

This is where art is the most difficult to teach and where there is the least amount of competition for academic positions. The work is hard; the students range from gifted to abhorrent. Here money is often tightest; programs are most expensive, and competition for good students among elective offerings is most intense.

Junior high programs (usually state-mandated) are all too often art factories. Programs are homogenized, students run in and out, seemingly on a conveyor belt, so many minutes per day, subjected to instruction that has been tried and true (read: cut and dried) and whittled down to the lowest common denominator. Often there has been little curriculum innovation for years.

Even though a moment ago I praised the experience factor in older art teachers, let me also point out that there is a negative flip-side. The oldest teachers often have migrated from elementary classrooms to high schools through attrition. There, they bide their time, seldom making waves, waiting for retirement to roll around. Multi-media, for example, is often little more than crayon and watercolor rather than photography, video, computer graphics, or animation. Words like *traditional* and *classic* art programs often serve as euphemisms for *stale*.

So, in the final analysis, the art education picture is a bit abstract. Art programs are seldom truly quantifiable as in math or science. Sometimes that's good. Sometimes it's not.

Teaching Creativity

The art of children is, in general, no more or less creative as they grow throughout their school years. Anyone who contends otherwise is merely repeating conventional wisdom from a generation ago.

During more than a quarter century in the classroom, I never noted much variation in creativity from one grade level to another. Creativity is not a fragile gift and need not be handled with the kid gloves often donned when art instructors try to impose various difficult-to-master art skills upon the growing child. The truly creative child may sometimes struggle a little, but in the end, will embrace each new skill and the teacher of that skill as well.

Now, having proclaimed it quite difficult to stifle creativity in a child, it is just as difficult to *teach* creativity. If not impossible, such efforts might, at least, be fairly unproductive. Before every artist reading this becomes apoplectic, make sure you read the terms correctly. That's not to say you shouldn't *encourage* creativity. Varying degrees of creativity are innate in all individuals of all ages. That creativity can be encouraged and unleashed. But can it be taught? I have my doubts.

Much is made today that art classes, apart from teaching technical skills (which, they do fairly well) are great places to learn problem-solving skills. Good problem solving exercises, almost by definition, involve trying to find creative solutions to problem situations. This is an attempt to teach creativity, though not necessarily from an artistic perspective. I've tried it at various academic levels.

Again and again, art skills aside, the creative student does well at these exercises.

Meanwhile, the not-so-gifted students fall back on trite, outdated solutions which are often inappropriate, impractical, inefficient, or frankly – just plain wrong.

More often than not, the uncreative individual simply gives up, refusing to even try. Or, in group situations, he or she reacts either by obstinately rejecting creative solutions, or by passively letting the more creative members of the team contribute all the ideas.

This tends to underline the major importance of creativity as a component of intelligence.



Teaching Abstract Design

One of the most difficult skills to teach young people is abstract design. In fact, there are those who contend that art teachers shouldn't even try; that it's somehow bad for students; that it's much too difficult a concept for such tender minds to absorb.

Before getting knee-deep in this, I should define just what's meant by abstract design. The term is best defined as two or three-dimensional art having little or no involvement in reality other than its own existence. That doesn't mean abstract design should always be totally devoid of recognizable subject matter – only that the design elements should dominate the content.

You could easily say that's a tall order even for an adult artist, and it is. It's this child-art-versus-adult-art relationship regarding abstract design that causes some artists to fear comparisons.

Thus, they push to avoid comparisons by limiting children's art to a reality-based set of visual standards. That thinking has some merit, though for all the wrong reasons. In many art skill-building activities, reality is the only rationale that makes any sense.

But, the fact is, children's art – especially that of young children – *is* abstract. It's their world filtered through their minds. That's abstract art by any definition. The *expression* of that abstraction may be hampered by a lack of technical skills and design expertise, but that doesn't make it any less abstract.

When I taught eighth grade, I developed a painting activity which taught both valuable art skills and abstract design fundamentals. Each student began with a lettering chart (or book) and a piece of tracing paper.

Instructions were to weave together by tracing and erasing as necessary, three letters from a single font (to encourage some degree of design unity) in such a way that part of each letter was concealed by part of another letter. No one letter was allowed to dominate the others. In effect, the letters were merely shapes, though the students sometimes resisted seeing them that way. First efforts were little more than monograms.

Gradually though, these tiny, traced elements began to develop into amazingly complex designs (sometimes too complex for student use). Once they arrived at a combination that met the structural limitations imposed, I helped each student decide on a shape and size for the painting.

The second phase of the project was to metrically enlarge the design from the tiny, traced rough draft onto a painting surface – two or four times larger. This taught scaling, measuring, and ruler skills, which were usually lacking in students at this age.

Once the design was enlarged to the painting surface, the students were limited to two primary colors, the corresponding secondary color, and black and white. Anything they could mix within these limitations was acceptable. Of course, the final skills involved neatly painting a basically flat geometric design.

Students also learned color mixing, brush control, and aesthetic values. In the end, the results were often startling to the students, sometimes even to me, though I taught this activity again and again over twenty years.

Lots of limitations, yes, but abstract design, without limitations, without some structure, without standards imposed by self or others, is chaos. That type of painting is what gives abstract painting a bad name, making those who cherish this type of work cringe.

In protecting the sanctity of their home turf, it's also what makes abstract artists question teaching abstract design skills to young people. But, taught correctly, with the same quality standards routinely applied to reality-based art, students very quickly come to grasp the difficulties arising from a *lack* of reality content in painting. In the process, they gain a high level of understanding and appreciation for abstract art. Say what you will, you can't arrive at that understanding unless you try to create such art in a disciplined mode.

Teaching Art History

A colleague who was about to teach a college art history course asked about the most effective way of teaching ancient art history – Paleolithic to Medieval. Though I don't recall ever teaching those particular periods, my keyword of advice for teaching art history at the high school and college level has to be *enthusiasm*. It's contagious. Though the facts are important and the teacher needs to know them cold, that's not the case for the students.

Knowing the facts only lends authority to what the teacher says.

The trick is to relate the facts with the art and times of the period and then relate *that* era to the students' own art and times – with enthusiasm. As always, it's not so much *what* is taught, but *how* it's taught.

For example, I've always liked to include offbeat trivia and humor in what I covered. When I taught college level art history, along with Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.K. Rue) I'd pop up a slide of an erotic drawing by Picasso too.

If they remembered the drawing (and believe me, they did), they would also remember the painting. The students also got a very accurate picture of what a rogue Picasso was.



Les Femmes d'Alger (O.K. Rue),
1909, Picasso

I have always loved history and social studies. But, it's always the trivial and peculiar which captures me, rather than facts and figures. The cool thing about history, art or otherwise, is that it was made by imperfect people subject to the same human foibles as the rest of us; whether Pablo Picasso, or Paul Gauguin, or Richard Nixon, or Bill Clinton.

This is the connection students need to make. Whether artists or politicians, their strengths and weaknesses, pride and prejudices affect what they did and said (or painted). It also makes them interesting. Whether it's "I am not a crook," or "I did not have sexual relations with that woman..." it's what makes them memorable. Being memorable is what history of any kind is all about.

In art history, whether Paleolithic, or Medieval, or Modern, it's easy for a teacher to forget that the artists are always more interesting than their art. Like artists from history, students are people too – often artists as well. They relate first and foremost to the human aspect of art. Only later do they relate to the art itself. Moreover, it's axiomatic in the field of education, you teach students first, then content.

Although it covers periods and cultures that are often difficult to understand, teaching *ancient* art is actually simpler because there's not as much surviving art to cover. Also, there are very few, if any, names to remember. Thus, both teacher and students are much less likely to get bogged down in details. They can more easily look at the big picture. In the absence of the artists (names and personalities), one can teach the culture that evoked the art.

Speaking from a Paleolithic perspective, if you look at cave painting, not from a stuffy, aesthetic or archaeological point of view, but instead, compared to the student decorating his or her own room, as cave painters were, in effect, doing, then the connection becomes one of the *here and now*, joined to the *then and there*. If an instructor combines this with a learning by doing activity or two (perhaps decorating an actual room in a Paleolithic mode), real learning takes place.

Teaching with Crayons

It's always interesting when something related to art makes headlines. Sometimes it's serious, such as artwork stolen during the Holocaust.

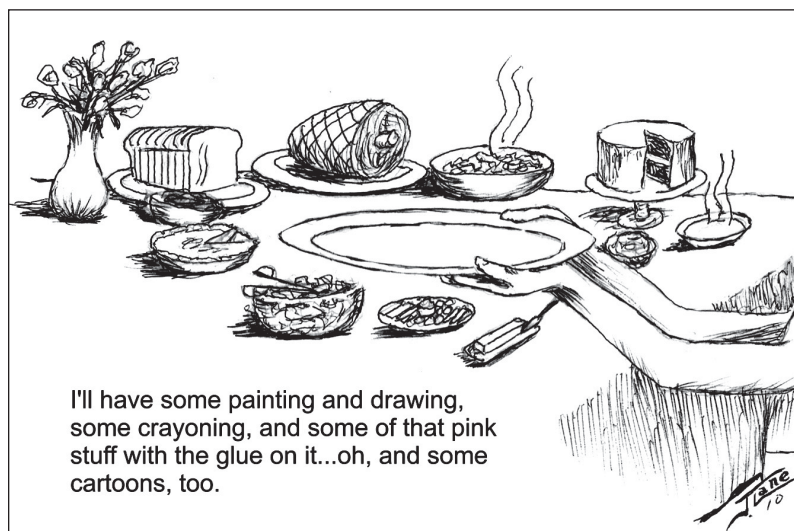
Sometimes it's seemingly silly, such as the politically-correct name for a crayon. Even then, there is the serious and the silly. When crayon manufacturers labeled their peach-colored crayon *Flesh Tone*, it was inconsiderate and small-minded.

When someone thinks the crayon labeled *Indian Red* has something to do with Native Americans, it's silly. Indian red is based upon iron oxide pigments originally from India, so the obvious recourse (if one must have recourse) would be to rename the pointy, waxy little things, *India Red*. But then, doing so would mean a difficult geography/history/sociology lesson on India, Indians, and Native Americans in order to explain to first graders (who can't, most of them, read the labels anyway) what happened to the *n* on their *India Red* crayon, and why!

The crayon thing might be a nice lead-in to the geography lesson, but it's probably a moot point insofar as the kids are concerned. The reason is simple.

Most adults realize they don't really learn much until it's needful and important. The same applies to children.

Teachers can teach as much as their minimal five or six hours a day with kids allow.



But, whether material is learned in the first place, and retained for any appreciable length of time in the second, depends almost entirely upon the child's felt *need* for such learning.

Crayons are important to younger children. So, through them, some ideas and ideals can be taught.

But, the most frustrating thing for teachers is that the sum-total of important things society thinks kids should learn keeps skyrocketing! That also includes learning about skyrockets.

So, a teacher has to pick and choose, usually dictated somewhat by his or her own teaching strengths, knowledge, and interests. And, if you think teachers have it bad, consider the poor kids. They're constantly bombarded by information (and not just trivia, by the way) that someone thinks should be important to them.

From this unholy smorgasbord of skills and information, the kids have to pick and choose, with some adult guidance, that which their appetite for learning will allow. The interesting thing about education, and something we don't often think about, is that every child is tailoring his or her education to their perceived present and future needs. They do so by selectively remembering only certain things from the mishmash of facts, figures, skills, ideas, and ideologies pumped into their little heads in school.

Parents and teachers push and pull one way or another, often based upon their own self-interests, but if children who are taught to draw don't learn how, it's because they have no interest in becoming an artist. It's possible, of course, that they'll develop the interest further down the road, at which time the skills will be learned.

Of course, things not learned can influence a child's future life choices. If a lack of childhood learning causes you to be ill-prepared for an attractive career, you have two choices: skip the career or become prepared.

Of course, by then, circumstances may make such preparation too difficult or impossible. Thus, there are those who would argue that children are in no position to choose what they learn. From a societal point of view, that may be true.

But in reality, whether society likes it or not, a child *is* in that position, guided mostly by his or her own self-interests. To my way of thinking, that's largely the way it should be.

Teaching Tips

Not so long ago, an artist friend confided that she had volunteered to teach children's art classes one or two days a week. She asked me to spill my guts about what to expect and load her down with general suggestions.

In the hope that others might find themselves in similar situations, I've decided to share those suggestions with the more general audience of fellow artists.

Keep in mind this is just off the top of my head, with little or no organization, which flies in the face of my very first and most important tip: the key to success in teaching is planning.

By planning I mean making sure you have your supplies all together, your thoughts all together, and your art aides all together. Then, plan for contingencies. If it rains all day when you have outdoor drawing planned, then have a projector with a box of slides of your work set up, just in case.

Here are some more vital teaching skills:

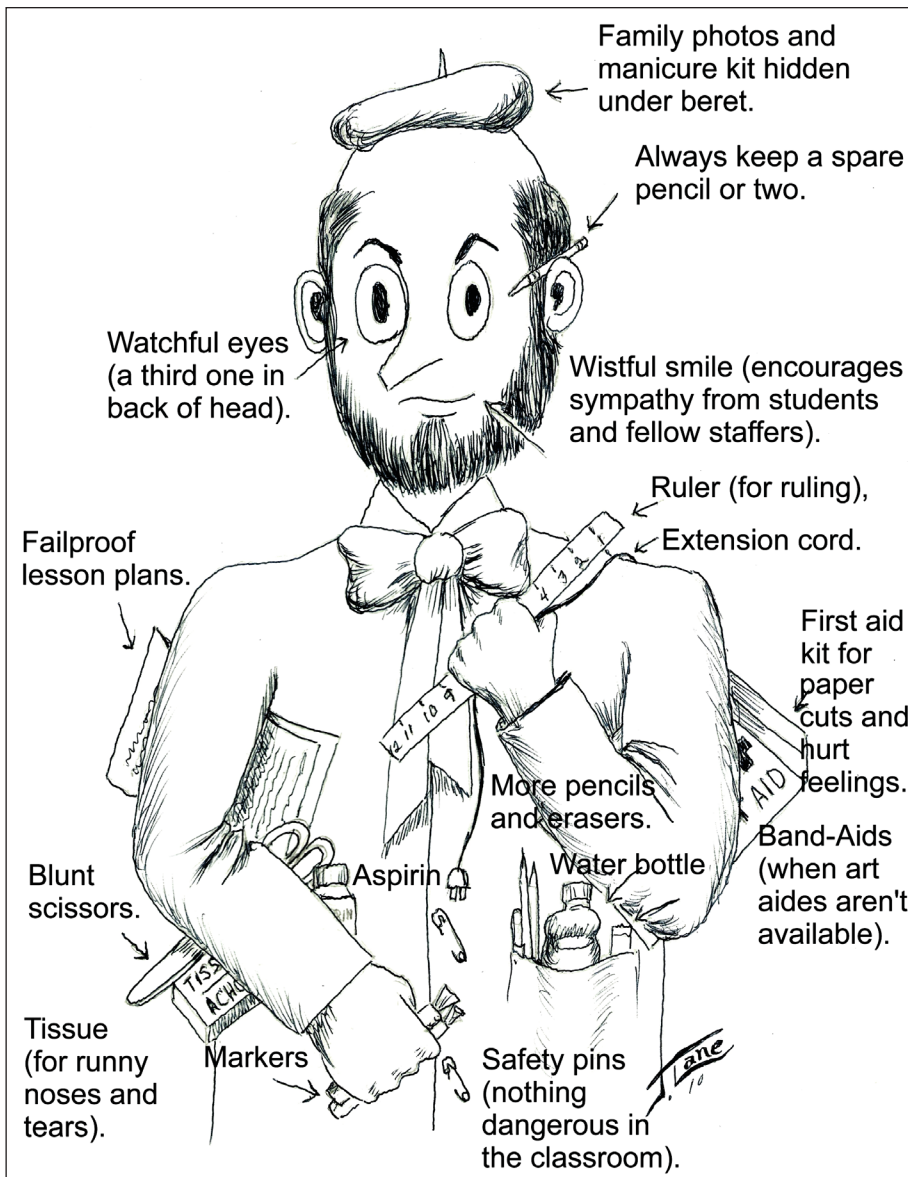
Learn to say no and mean it. I know, if you were good at saying no, you wouldn't be in such a situation.

Push the kids. They will want to stop before they've finished.

Teach simple composition – foreground, middle ground, background. Remind them they're not drawing a car, for instance, but a picture of a car, then point out the distinction.

Plan for a vast range of abilities, pace, and attitudes. Expect some work to go unfinished.

Emphasize rough drafts. Show samples of what you expect of the kids. Ask that all drawings be approved by you before any color is added.



Provide content inspiration. It might be verbal, physical, environmental, audiovisual, etc.

Plan your time carefully. Allow cleanup time of at least 5-10 minutes if the activity is messy and the class is large.

Keep the kids in their seats as much as possible. The larger the class, the less movement you can tolerate.

Don't expect kids to be quiet except when you're talking – then, demand quiet. Don't raise your voice, lower it.

Anticipate the attention span for each age group. Expect a half-hour for younger kids and up to an hour for older ones. Splitting the difference, 45 minutes is an ideal art class length for most projects and ages.

Don't go by your first name. You're their teacher, not their friend.

Smile and praise... smile and praise... smile and praise. For younger kids, this may be all that's needed. Older ones need more specific forms of positive feedback. But then, expect them to follow through with your constructive criticism. Otherwise, just keep giving them the same line until they do. When a student surprises you with the quality of his or her work, act surprised and gush a little. However, over-gushing devalues this reward.

Always take aim at a work's most grievous fault first. Don't burden a kid with a half-dozen suggestions at a time. Watch for signs of resignation or frustration and know when to back off. It's only art, not brain surgery.

Take pictures. The kids love it. My digital camera is always a big hit. Pictures make kids feel that what they are doing is special and important.

Have at least one other adult or teen help you. I've often had three or four teens with a class of 30 kids. They are a great help. It's good for the teens, too. Maybe they'll decide to become art teachers. Just as important, maybe they'll decide "no WAY".

If you need something, don't hesitate to ask the administration. That's what they're there for.

Arrive at least 45 minutes early to prepare. You also need this time to mentally prepare yourself.

Show your own work when you first introduce yourself. It establishes your credentials in the minds of the kids.

Be efficient in all things. Like it or not, you are directing the mass-production of art.

All flat work should be at least 12 by 18 inches. It can always be cut down later.

Emphasize LTPDRS (look-think-plan-do-refine-and sign).

Be flexible; think on your feet. Think fast and think clearly.

Speak carefully in the early stages. You must act confident, whether you feel it or not. There are a lot of similarities between teaching and acting. Think of the classroom as a stage: the curtain going up as the first kid comes in, going down as the last one leaves.

Anticipate both needs and reactions. Experience plays a huge role in this. Learn to think like a kid. Try to anticipate your students' first safe, trite responses to an activity – then make it clear that you won't accept these responses. Keep pushing for the less-obvious solution to the art problem.

Be aware; the older they get, the more differences there are between boys and girls. Most adults understand this instinctively, but often forget it when they step in front of a class.

Take a water bottle regardless of the time of year. Talking is thirsty work.

Pack a briefcase with a teacher's emergency kit: pain relievers, scissors, extra pencils and erasers, manicure set, Band-Aids, safety pins, markers, a fail-proof lesson plan or two, a spare projector bulb (assuming it's your projector), extension cord, hard candy (for energy), cough drops, travel pack of tissues, photos of the people and possessions that are important to you, such as your spouse, children, pet or latest work of art (great for building rapport with kids when they finish their work before the end of class).

And finally, between classes, sit down and relax. Rebuild both your stamina and enthusiasm for the next group.